

THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT FOR THE RECRUITMENT AND FORMATION OF VOCATIONS

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In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992), John Paul II speaks of "The challenges facing priestly formation at the conclusion of the second millennium"² and considering the different aspects of human life today, John Paul II gives the positive and the negative sides of these aspects of the life of children, adolescents, young people and adults; he considers the negative aspects as the main hindrances for priestly vocations today.

Vocations to the priesthood in the diocese of Malta are not forthcoming as in the past. After the publication of *Pastores dabo vobis*, it was deemed necessary and important by the Centre for Diocesan Vocations of the diocese of Malta to find out what was hindering the number of vocations to the priesthood to grow in the Maltese Christian community.

The Centre for Diocesan Vocations asked the help of Canon Benjamin Tonna to compile a survey in order to see and analyse the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts of the members who attended the meetings of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations during the years from 1972 to 1993. In the meantime the Centre also asked and received the help of Rev Professor Pietro Gianola of the Pontifical Salesian University to have access to the section of the library of the same University which specialises in the Theology and the Pastoral work for vocations.

1. The author was appointed *Auditor* to the Eight Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today*. He was also invited to deliver a speech on *The pastoral work for priestly vocations today*. Since then, the author read an M. Phil. Degree at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta with a dissertation entitled *Priestly Vocations in Post-Conciliar Malta*.
2. See *Pastores dabo vobis*, 5.

This investigation into the problem about the diminution of priestly vocations in the diocese of Malta was made by the Centre for Diocesan Vocations when it organized a survey among 720 persons who attended the Vocation Guidance Courses between 1976 and 1993. The survey was made in 1993 and it put questions to the ex-members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations about the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts in which they lived and their impact on the possibility of their being called to the priesthood.

There were 446 respondents or 61.5% of all those who received the survey who were ready to give important information about the experiences which they made in the years they attended the Vocation Guidance Courses. They also provided the positive and negative causes which were influencing the number of vocations in the Diocese of Malta at that time. It must be said that 62 of the respondents or 14% opted to become priests!

The age group of all the respondents was between 15 and 55 years of age because while some of the respondents were school leavers, others had already taken up a career. But the young respondents were in the majority and therefore their answers give an up-to-date picture of the life of some of the young people of today. However, it was not easy to analyse the different situations of two different categories of people: people who were still in a state of discernment and these were in the majority, and people who had already found their place in life.

1.1 The first invitation to attend vocation meetings

1.1.1 Early in Life

When the questionnaire asked the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to say at what age they received the first invitation to attend vocation meetings, 35% said that they were invited in the last year of their primary school and 59% said that they were invited during the secondary school years. This means that they were invited in the year when they received the sacrament of Confirmation or immediately after.

There were 6% of the respondents who said that they were invited for the Vocation meetings neither in the primary nor in the secondary school. Probably these were the people who received the call to the priesthood when they had already taken up a career. There has always been a small but continuous flow of adult vocations in the Major Seminary of Malta.

1.1.2 *Who encouraged them to attend?*

The questionnaire also asked the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to say who encouraged them to attend the vocation meetings. Forty one percent of the respondents said that they were invited to attend the Vocation Guidance Courses by priests, while 28% were invited by friends; 18% said that they were invited by no one in particular. But only 11% said that they were invited by parents and only 2% said that they were invited by teachers.

The questionnaire asked the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to say if there were more than one person who invited them to attend the Vocation Guidance Courses. If we add all together the times the individual persons who encouraged young people to attend the vocation meetings were mentioned, it can be said that the priests still head the list because 37% of the respondents said that they were invited by priests, 27% mentioned their friends, 15% mentioned their parents, while 03% mentioned their teachers.

The respondents referred to priests, friends, parents and teachers as the persons who encouraged them to attend the meetings of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations. It is very important to note that the persons mentioned by the respondents form the principal components of the Christian community in which they lived and therefore they mentioned the main environments in which they received their human and Christian formation.

It must also be noted that these persons who encouraged the respondents to attend the vocation meetings are the media through which God makes His call heard in the heart of the Christian adolescents. The Second Vatican Council and other Church documents about the pastoral work for Vocations make it clear that God wants His call to be heard through the Christian community.³

1.1.3 *The special role of the spiritual director*

It is very important to note that 57% of the respondents of the questionnaire said that they had a spiritual director.

3. See *Optatam totius*, 2.

The presence of priests in the life of the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations is a determining factor, and the programme of the Centre insists that members should have a spiritual director especially from Form 5 of the secondary school upwards.

1.2 The motives for attending the vocation meetings

1.2.1 The Vocation to the priesthood

There were 24% of all the respondents and 49% of those respondents who opted to become priests who said that they attended the vocation meetings organized by the Centre for Diocesan Vocation for the express purpose of knowing about their vocation to the priesthood.

There were other motives for which the respondents attended vocation meetings: 22% of the respondents said that they wanted “to get to know friends”, 21% said that they wanted to know themselves, 15% mentioned prayer, and 10% mentioned “to play.” There were 5% of the respondents who did not specify any motive but 3% said that they were forced by their parents to attend vocation meetings.

Although most of those who opted to become priests said that they attended the vocation meetings to “know about the vocation to the priesthood”, they also mentioned the same motives for attending the vocation meetings as the respondents in general: to get to know friends, to know themselves, to pray and to play.

1.2.2 First preference given to the vocation meeting

The test case for the first preference and the high percentage given to the motive of attending the Vocation Centre, i.e. “To know about the Vocation to the Priesthood” can be seen in the question which the questionnaire asked the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations what they did when, besides going for the vocation meeting, they had a pleasure occasion or some other appointment at the same time.

Of all the respondents, 64% said that they preferred the vocation meeting and 18% said that they preferred the pleasure occasion. There were 15% who said that they would attend none of the occasions and 03% said that they would have tried to attend both!

Sixty three percent of those who opted to become priests said that when they had other things to do besides going to the vocation meetings, they preferred to go to the latter. Thirty seven percent said that they preferred to go to the pleasure occasion.

The positive response to an invitation to attend a vocation meeting does not necessarily mean that those who attend the vocation meetings are in fact called to the priesthood. But it may happen that the attendance of vocation meetings coincides with a vocation to the priesthood.

1.3 The call and response

1.3.1 The call to the priesthood

In preparing this question for the questionnaire it was made sure that the vocation that was referred to was the vocation to the priesthood. Fifty eight percent of all the respondents of the questionnaire said that they felt the call to the priesthood sometime in their lives.

1.3.2 Motives for leaving the vocation meetings

It is a fact that many boys who begin to attend the vocation meetings in the parish or/and at the Seminary drop out along the years. Twenty four percent of the respondents said that they never ceased to feel the call to the priesthood. While 76% said that they ceased to feel the call to the priesthood at a certain moment of their life.

When asked to say when they ceased to feel the call to the priesthood, 51% said that they no longer attended the Vocation Guidance Courses within the age bracket 10 to 14 years or the secondary school years; 35% within the 15 to 19 years period or the post secondary years and 14% said that they ceased to attend the vocation meetings from 20 years upward or when they took up a career or followed a University course.

There were many reasons why the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations discontinued to attend the vocation meetings. Thirty two percent transferred themselves to other vocation meetings that were organized by the Religious Vocation Centres. Eleven percent chose a career.

But 57% of the respondents mentioned other reasons. These reasons ranged from “not called” (27%), got fed up with vocation meetings (25%), needed more time for study (17%), found a job (10%), lost their vocation (10%), went to other places of formation (7%), they were expelled from the Centre (4%).

1.3.3 The decision

A determining question was put to the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations whereby they were asked to say what they decided to do in life.

Forty four percent of the respondents said that they wanted to get married and 14% said that they wanted to become priests. While 4% of the respondents said that they neither wanted to marry nor to become priests.

But 38% said that they were undecided about their vocation. This large percentage of young people who are undecided about their future vocation requires a plan of action on the part of the Centre so that it can provide help to these young people to know what God wants them to do in their life. It can make new contacts with them, organize a reunion and offer them counselling sessions.

1.4 The family environment

In the past, the Christian family was considered to be a fertile ground for the growth of priestly vocations in Malta. Considering the exalted image of the priest that was presented to the Maltese Catholics up to the sixties, it is not surprising to know that many Maltese families desired to have one of their boys “becoming” a priest. On the part of the young man who became a priest it can be said that he could count on the support which the family was sure to give him to live a “comfortable” life.

This favourable environment which many Maltese priests found in their families was traditionally described by the general term “good family” and it consisted of certain structures such as getting married in Church, the baptizing and the Christian upbringing of the children, and fidelity to the marriage vows.

If the environment of the traditional family succeeded to support many vocations to the priesthood in the diocese of Malta, it may also be supposed that the decrease

of vocations to the priesthood in the diocese of Malta coincided with the changes in the life of the family.⁴

Less children in the average Maltese family, an inadequate sex education, lack of Christian formation especially for adolescents and reticence about the promotion of a priestly vocation in the family may be some of the factors that contributed to the decline of vocations in the diocese of Malta.⁵

1.4.1 *Begetting a lesser number of children*

The survey which was held among the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations has shown that 82% of all the respondents have between 2 and 4 children in the family. This means that a very large majority of these Maltese families still bear a good number of children. It was also found that there were 13% of the respondents who said that in their families there were between 5 and 11 children while 5% said that there was only one child in their family.

When one considers the number of children in the families of those who opted for the priestly vocation, one finds that 72% of these respondents said that in their family there was an average of 3.48 children and 26% of the same said that there were more than 4 children in their families. Only 2% of these respondents said that there was only one child in their families.

4. See Il-Kulleġġ tal-Kappillani, *Seminar Pastorali*, Malta 1968, 44.

A description of the Maltese family which was given during a seminar about the pastoral life of the diocese of Malta showed that the "Maltese society was made up of good families." However, Monsignor Aloysius Deguara, who was a parish priest at the time, speaking in this seminar said that from his experience in the pastoral field, it could be said that there were going to be important changes in the life of the Maltese family in the coming future. He mentioned the threat of infidelity and separations, the shifting of responsibility to transmit the Christian catechesis to third persons, the drop in the birth rate and the changes in the social life of the family; these were going to contribute to a lesser Christian environment in the Maltese family.

5. See Malta, Vocation Centre Archives. Album 1. The statistics of the population of the Seminary of Malta show that the diocese of Malta began having less vocations in 1977. From 1956 and 1964, there were 103 new seminarians (15 in 1957, 13 in 1959, 8 in 1960, 16 in 1961, 10 in 1962 and 41 in 1964). From 1965 to 1974, there were 112 new seminarians (26 in 1966, 18 in 1967, 10 in 1968, 19 in 1970, 18 in 1972 and 21 in 1974). From 1975 to 1984, there were 49 new seminarians (13 in 1976, 6 in 1978, 15 in 1980, 6 in 1982 and 9 in 1984). From 1985 to 1994 there were 54 new seminarians (7 in 1985, 6 in 1986, 4 in 1987, 6 in 1988, 6 in 1989, 6 in 1990, 6 in 1991, 5 in 1992, 5 in 1993 and 3 in 1994). From 1995 to 2000, there were 24 new seminarians (5 in 1995, 4 in 1996, 4 in 1997, 3 in 1998, 3 in 1999 and 5 in 2000).

It can therefore be said that when the Maltese family bears more children, there is a bigger possibility for the children of the Maltese family to choose the vocation to the priesthood as the will of God for them and as their way of life for the future. In recent years the Maltese population increased but the Maltese family bore less children and this may be one of the causes for the drop of vocations and therefore the cause of a lesser number of priests to serve the Church today and in the future.

1.4.2 Imparting an inadequate sex education in the family

Considering the results of the survey that was held among the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations, it was found that 20% of the respondents of the survey who wanted to follow the priestly vocation said that they received sex education from their parents while 9% of all the respondents of the survey said that they received their sex education from their parents.

But it is the family that has to give the first and most important aspect of sex education which is love. Each member of the family builds his relationship with the other persons on the recognition that the other person is his equal and therefore he has to be respected and not manipulated. This kind of relationship is based on love. Every human being is made to live in a communion of life which is based on reciprocal love. A human being is a sexual being, because he is either a man or a woman. The difference between the two is not just a biological one; but it is a difference that makes man and woman two completely different personalities. Notwithstanding the different personalities which woman and man have, they are both integrated, harmonized and united in love. Man and woman reach their full maturity when they succeed in integrating their personalities in love by giving themselves to one another.

Whether a human being gets married in future or chooses virginity for one reason or other, he/she has to develop his/her sexual maturity in a way that it helps him/her to relate to other human beings as a man or as a woman being always ready to live for others. When parents do not impart this kind of sex education to their children, this is an indication that their children are not being given a good preparation to devote their lives for the love of others when they get married or when they follow a vocation in the priesthood or in consecrated life. This is because, man and woman can take two different attitudes towards the maturity in love: they can either have an egoistic attitude whereby each one or one of them satisfies one's own needs at the expense of the other; or they may have an altruistic attitude whereby

they love one another by giving themselves to each other or one of them gives oneself to the other. This reciprocal love between two persons or the lack of it, can also be seen in a supernatural way because each one of them or at least one of them sees Jesus in the other person and loves the other person for the sake of Jesus (see Mt 25, 45); the lack of this reciprocal love may become sinful.

When they live in a Christian way and when they exercise the act of marriage, the husband and wife or the father and mother do so out of complete self giving to one another. This is the attitude that is immediately transmitted to the fruit of their love: their child or their children. The offspring feels from the very first moment of its existence that the aim of its life is to give itself to others. In this way, without mentioning sex or without directly giving sex education to the children, parents impart a balanced and mature sexual attitude to their children. Far from the egocentric way in which children, young people and adults may live their sexual life, parents impart a sexual attitude to their children that is all imbued with the love for others. Sex education means teaching others to donate themselves to other persons and helping children and young people to develop a true and authentic maturity and an equilibrium that makes them feel at home with all kinds of persons. This sexual attitude towards others has its origin in the love of self which succeeds to fulfill the golden rule: love your neighbour as yourself. This love for others which is characterized by self-giving, is also the source of the virtue of purity which means the fullness of the love for others for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

1.4.3 Living a superficial Christian life

Within the Maltese family, Christian life is supported by different moments of prayer. The survey listed these moments of prayer in order to help the ex-members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to say what preference they had given to these different moments of prayer. The result of the survey showed that participating in the Mass had top priority whether they participated in it daily (40%), often (56%), or rarely (04%). A small percentage opened the day with a morning prayer (14%), while an equal number paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the day (14%). Very few attended prayer meetings (09%). At the end of the day, many found time for prayer by saying the Rosary (22%).

Back in 1967, when a Mass attendance survey was held in the diocese of Malta, Monsignor Annetto Depasquale, while presenting the results of this survey, pointed out that a good number of children were missing Mass on Sunday and that one had

to worry about the future of these children.⁶ Although this survey about Mass attendance has nothing to do with the survey that was carried out among the ex-members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations, it can be said that a decrease in Christian faith among children has been coming down to our day for some time and it can easily lead to a drop in the number of vocations to the priesthood. In fact there was sharp drop in the number of seminarians, in the number of new seminarians and in the number of ordinations which occurred in the last years of the twentieth century. Vocations presuppose a strong faith in Christ and in the Gospel in persons who want to offer their lives for the service of the Church.

Today something radical is needed to develop a very deep Christian life in the Maltese family in order that it may reach the ideal which the Church presents to the Christian family to become “the domestic Church”⁷ which is modeled on the words of Jesus, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.”⁸ Pastoral work among the families should emphasize the fact that the married life of a man and a woman should be lived in Christ and that the sacrament of marriage is a sign and efficacious instrument of the presence of Christ among the married couple and the family. This relationship between husband and wife in marriage is lived in the fullness of reciprocal love.

The Christian family can help its children grow in their Christian life by following the example of the maturity of the family of Nazareth which helped Jesus to grow “in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.”⁹ In order to do so, it is quite evident that parents need outside help in order to give a good Christian and spiritual life to their children. The help of religious associations and of the movements of Christian living is more than necessary for children, adolescents and young people to develop their Christian and spiritual life.

1.4.4 *Encouraging less the vocations to the priesthood*

The survey that was held among the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations has shown that 49% of the respondents discussed their vocation to the priesthood with their parents. This percentage goes up to 60% among the respondents

6. See *Seminar Pastoralis*, 59

7. See SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 11; see also *Lumen gentium*, 11; cf. also *Familiaris consortio*, 21.

8. See Mt 18, 20.

9. See Lk 2, 52.

who chose the priestly vocation as their way of life. Ninety eight percent of all the respondents said that their parents would have rejoiced if their sons said that they wanted to become priests.

The survey made two different questions to assess the reaction of the parents to the priestly vocation of their sons. One question asked whether the parents were against the priestly vocation. The response to this question showed that 01.5% of all the respondents said that their parents objected to their priestly vocation. This percentage was a little higher (02%) among those respondents who wanted to become priests.

Another question asked whether the parents were indifferent to the priestly vocation of their sons; 18% of the respondents said that their parents would have been indifferent had they wanted to become priests. This percentage was much lower (02%) among those respondents who chose the priestly vocation.

The contribution of the family to bring to maturity the children and especially those who have a vocation to the priesthood can only take place when the family is evangelised with the Word of God and when it lives this Word in a radical way. The family today needs to be re-evangelised by the announcement of the Commandment of love. This does not strictly mean that the Gospel is announced word for word; but that it is announced by making the persons who make up the family believe that they are following Jesus. Vocations are the results of a life based on Evangelisation rather than the end product or a happy ending to a discussion about vocations between parents and their children, the fulfillment of the desire of the parents that their children become priests or the encouragement which parents make to their children to reach to the priesthood.

Every priest in the Church knows very well the role which his family played in his vocation to the priesthood. In the Synod of Bishops of 1990 about *The Formation of priests in the circumstances of today*, Bishop Norbert Wendelin Mtega of Tanzania made a very important contribution to show the role of the family in vocations. Bishop Mtega said that the families are “the guarantee for a natural and balanced growth of character” and “the school for psychological, spiritual and human growth.”¹⁰ James Cardinal Hickey of the United States said in the same Synod of

10. See Dronigi Tettamanzi, *La Formazione dei Sacerdoti nelle Circostanze attuali*, Roma 1990, 209.

Bishops “that united and healthy families marked by a deep faith and prayerfulness, have a significant part in fostering vocations and formation.”¹¹

The Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* gives the reason why a very special responsibility falls upon the Christian family in the pastoral work for Vocations. It says that “the sacrament of Matrimony shares in its unique way in the educational mission of the Church, the Teacher and Mother”¹² and Vatican II says that “the families themselves, generously accepting the gift of human life, are as it were a first seminary.”¹³

However, an important warning comes from the well known writer Igino Giordani about the rising and the fall in the number of vocations to the priesthood vis-à-vis the life of the family. He says that “the priesthood must sanctify the family; and the family must give life to the priesthood...the family and the priesthood correspond for the better or for the worse; as the moral level of the family goes up, the dignity of the priesthood becomes higher; and the more the priesthood goes down in dignity, a lesser number of vocations comes from the family. If the priesthood is not lived well, the family will fall in adultery, divorce and abortion; if the virtue of chastity disappears from the life of the family, there will be no more vocations for the seminaries or for the religious houses.”¹⁴

1.4.5 Implementing the pastoral plan of the diocese for the Maltese family

In 1985 the Archdiocese of Malta published its Pastoral Plan (1986-1991) and it said that the Church in Malta wanted “to strengthen the Maltese family and to maintain its Christian identity”¹⁵ because by so doing “it will also strengthen the Maltese society.”¹⁶ The work that had to be done in favour of the family aimed to achieve better relationships between husband and wife, the nurturing of children, paternal and maternal responsibility, formation for a Christian life and the apostolate

11. See Ibid, 52.

12. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis* 41.

13. See *Optatam totius*, 2.

14. See IGINO GIORDANI, *Laicato e sacerdozio*, Roma 1964, 149.

15. See ARCIDIOCESI TA' MALTA, *Pjan pastorali* 1986-1991, 1985, 94.

16. See *ibid*, 95.

of the family or the domestic Church.¹⁷ This Pastoral Plan of the Archdiocese of Malta said that it was important that Christian parents in nurturing their children should help their children in recognizing their vocation.¹⁸ But the Plan did not simply say that the parents should promote vocations in their families but that they should create a family atmosphere whereby the spirit of faith and prayer that permeated the family made the family “the first seminary for its children.”¹⁹

1.5 The socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts of priestly vocations in Malta.

The family prepares children and young people to continue developing their personality in places of leisure and in voluntary work, in schools, in religious associations, and in parishes. The survey about the socio-cultural and ecclesial environments of priestly vocations examined the impact of these contexts on the life of the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations and in particular on their choice of vocation to the priesthood.

The Gospel and the teaching of the Church are needed for the understanding of the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts of priestly vocations today. The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* speaks of “Gospel discernment”²⁰ as “the criterion for making practical choices in the new and unique reality of the teaching of Jesus Christ”²¹ with regards to vocations to the priesthood.

When examining the results of the survey, one can notice that there are positive and negative elements in the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts where the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations spent their years of childhood, adolescence and youth life. Besides, both the positive and the negative elements of these socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts present a challenge to educators and young people so that they will be able to change the environments with the life of the Gospel.

17. See *ibid.*

18. See *ibid.*, 82.

19. See *ibid.*

20. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 37.

21. See *ibid.*

When the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts in which children, adolescents and young people grow become evangelised, then they will help the persons who live in them to become mature human beings and Christians. This Christian environment will also help these persons to be the protagonists who will bring a further change for the better in society and in the Church. It is expected that from among these young Christians there will be more people who will be able to offer their lives to the Church and serve her in the vocation to the priesthood.

1.5.1. The social context

1.5.1.1 Leisure

An important factor in the life of young people is the time for leisure. The questionnaire made a distinction between the leisure which the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations experienced in adolescence and in youth. Sports, religious associations, friends, outings, discos and feasts were the sources of enjoyment for the members of the Vocation Centre.

In adolescence, the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations preferred principally sports (38%), religious associations (16%), friends (15%), outings (10%) and discos (07%). While in youth life, the members preferred discos (26%), friends (23%), outings (19%), sports (13%) and religious associations (06%). In adolescence, the respondents of the survey who opted to become priests preferred religious associations (18%), sports, (14%), outings (14%), friends (12%). In youth, those who opted to become priests preferred friends (27%), outings (16%), discos and cinema (10%), sports (08%), music (06%), and religious associations (06%).

1.5.1.2 Voluntary Work

Another factor which contributes to the formation of young people is the amount of social openings which help them discover that they can contribute to the well being of others with their voluntary work. Lay associations, old people's homes, parishes, homes for the disabled, foreign missions, and children's homes are the environments where the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations worked for the benefit of others who were in need of help.

Most of the members of the Centre did voluntary work in religious associations (30%), with old people (23%), in parishes (14%), with disabled persons (09%), abroad in the missions (07%), and with children (03%). And those who opted to

become priests did voluntary work with old people (42%), charitable associations (20%), in parishes (10%), abroad in the missions (10%), and with children (08%).

1.5.2 The cultural context

1.5.2.1 The school and Christian formation

The survey that was held among the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations showed that 32% of the respondents went to the Government schools including the Junior Lyceums, the area Secondary Schools and Trade schools. While 65.5% went to Private schools run by the Church or other institutions. 02.5% did not mention the school they attended.

There were 75% among those respondents who opted to become priests who said that they attended the Church schools. The biggest number frequented the Minor Seminary (28%), followed by De La Salle College (10%), St Augustine College (10%), and St Aloysius College (08%).

When asked what kind of environment did the school create around the members of the Centre, 69% of the respondents said that the school environment helped them live a Christian life; while 31% said that no help was provided to them to live a Christian life.

The respondents who opted to become priests were more positive in their evaluation of the kind of environment that the school which they attended provided to their students. Of these respondents, 82% said that the school helped them live a Christian life; while 18% said that the school did not help them to live a Christian life.

The respondents of the survey provided the reasons why the school helped them to live a Christian life. The environment was described by the majority of the respondents as “a religious environment” (18%). But others were more specific when they said that the environment in their schools was imbued with a human aspect of education (18%) and with prayer (15%). While teaching, good Christian formation, religion lessons and vocation activities helped them to live the Christian life.

Those who opted to become priests mentioned religious activities (20%), teachers who gave them good examples (16%), and Christian formation (16%) as the main

reasons why the school helped them to live a Christian life.

When the survey asked the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to say whether the school created any difficulties to them for living a Christian life, 69% of the respondents said that they found no difficulties, while 31% did find difficulties to live a Christian life in the school.

One hundred and twelve gave a reason why the school created difficulties for them to live a Christian life. Most of the respondents mentioned bad friends (41%) and others just said friends (18%). Other respondents mentioned an indifferent attitude to religion (15%), and the environment in general (14%).

Among the respondents who opted to become priests, 18% said that the school created difficulties for their Christian life. They blamed their school mates because they were bad boys (55%) and because they were indifferent to Religion (45%).

1.5.2.2 The school and vocations

The survey also questioned the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations to see whether the school helped their vocation to the priesthood. One hundred and seventy one of the respondents gave a positive answer.

Among the reasons they gave as to why the school helped the students in the choice of their vocation to the priesthood, 45% mentioned the vocation meetings and 39% mentioned the people in the school who helped them in this regard.

Those who opted to become priests mentioned the following reasons: 30% mentioned counselling, 18% the vocation meetings and 08% said that their teachers spoke to them about the subject of their vocation.

When asked whether the school discouraged them to maintain their vocation to the priesthood, some said that they were discouraged to follow their vocation.

When they were asked to give the reasons how the school discouraged their vocation to the priesthood, 50% blamed their friends, 18% said that the subject of vocation was given very little importance and 18% said that other ways of life were given priority to the vocation to the priesthood.

Very few of those who opted to become priests explained how the school discouraged their vocation to the priesthood; there were only a few answers.

A specific question was put to the members of the Vocations Centre to glean from them more information about the reaction of the schoolmates regarding the vocation of their friends. Most of the members of the Centre or 87% said that they were not annoyed if their friends knew that they attended vocation meetings. But 13% said that they were annoyed by their friends when the latter came to know that they attended vocation meetings.

1.5.3 The Ecclesial environment

1.5.3.1 Religious associations

Most of the members (49%) of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations attended the Society for Christian Doctrine or as it is commonly called the M.U.S.E.U.M. (*Magister Utinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus*). Other respondents were members of other religious associations like Youth Centres (08%), Catholic Action (07%), Legion of Mary (05%) and Altar Boys (04%).

The members of the Vocations Centre who became priests attended the same religious associations as the other members and with an equal percentage.

When the survey that was held among the members of the Centre asked what kind of help did the environment of Religious Associations and Movements of Christian life offered them to grow in their Christian life, an interesting list of helps was given, priority being given to prayer (25%), help in general (23%), instruction (16%), Christian formation (09%), and counselling (07%).

The members of the Centre who opted to become priests gave priority to Christian life (14%) and then they mentioned almost the same helps as their friends had done: prayer (14%), help in general (10%), doctrine (10%), and spiritual life (7%).

The survey asked what kind of help did religious associations give them to find their vocation. The respondents mentioned help in general (39%), counselling and spiritual direction (14%), vocation guidance (13%), instruction (10%), prayer (07%) and witness (03.5%).

The members of the Centre who opted to become priests mentioned help and support in general (42%), spiritual help (14%), life of prayer (12%), talk to a priest (09%), freedom to choose (04.5%), good example (04.5%).

1.5.3.2 The Witness of Priests

The presence of priests in the life of the members of the Vocation Centre can be considered as part of their ecclesial environment.

When the members of the Centre were asked whether they had a spiritual director, 57% said yes. And 72% of those who opted to become priests said that they had a spiritual director.

Then they were asked whether they met priests who left a good impression on them. Those who said yes were 89% while those who opted to become priests were many more and they amounting to 98%.

The survey asked what kind of impression did the priests leave on them. The respondents in general mentioned virtues (40%), pastoral dedication (35%), priestly vocation (07%), moral and spiritual life (06%), sermons (06%), joy (05%) and the life of prayer (02%).

While those who opted for the priesthood mentioned pastoral commitment (45%), spiritual life (35%), time for young people (10%), and happiness (10%).

The survey also asked whether the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations met priests who impressed them by their bad behaviour. Of all the respondents, 48% said yes and 52% said no.

Those who opted to become priests, 67% said yes and 33% said no.

The survey wanted the respondents to specify what kind of bad impression did they receive from priests.

In general, the respondents mentioned principally sense of superiority and pride (37%), shouting (15%), non-contact with the world (15%), avarice (12%), hypocrisy (11%), indifference (10%).

Those who opted to become priests, 22% mentioned shouting, 11% indifference, 11% egoism, 07% childishness, 07% too busy, 07% quarrelsome.

The survey asked whether the members of the Vocations Centre were in favour of the celibacy of the priest. Of all the respondents, 76% said that they were in favour while 88% of those who opted to become priests said that they were in favour.

Finally the survey asked the members of the Centre to say what impression did they get of the priest when others would speak about him.

Out of all the respondents 49% said that they had a good impression of priests when they heard priests or others talk about them on the radio; the number lowered to 42% when they heard priests talk or others talk about them on television; and the number went further down (31%) when respondents read articles of priests or about priests in the papers.

Those who opted to become priests said that they had a good impression of priests when they heard them talk or others talked about priests on television (38%); the number lowered among these respondents when they referred to priests on radio (36%); and only 18% said that they had a good impression of priests when they read articles of priests or about priests in the papers.

1.6 Christian life and vocations

The Second Vatican Council put the achievement of holiness as the ideal of every Christian and the Apostolic Constitution *Christifideles Laici* said that “we come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the *prime and fundamental vocation* that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.”²²

Only a deep spiritual life based on evangelisation can give the right attitudes to children, adolescents, young people and adults to discern the will of God for them and in particular the vocation to the ministerial priesthood.

22. See JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 16.

The survey that was held among the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations has shown that although the family, the parish community and the Vocations Centre somehow helped to introduce the members of the Centre to the spiritual life as the Church conceives it today, it can be very clearly seen that some of these members do not know the true meaning of spiritual life and they do not live a deep spiritual life that can help them give themselves totally to God especially in the priesthood.

The survey has also shown that some of the members of the Centre still believe that the spiritual life is the sum total of a number of prayers. Besides that, they also consider that the spiritual life is a personal concern and therefore they still retain an individualistic attitude when they pray with others. This way of conceiving spiritual life is not in conformity with what the Church teaches today.

“Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (see Rm 6:22; Gal 5:22), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to *follow and imitate Jesus Christ*, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering.”²³

Such a life of holiness as the Church presents it to its members can easily lead some of them to dedicate their lives for the others by accepting to become priests when this is the will of God for them. Some of the respondents of the survey did accept their vocation to the priesthood. In prayer they put themselves in the presence of God and they believed that He was calling them to the priesthood. They also succeeded to move through the stages of the spiritual life that was presented to them especially by the Centre for Diocesan Vocations.

1.6.1 Life of prayer

1.6.1.1 Meditating the Gospel in daily life

When asked about their commitment to make their meditation on the Bible, only 04% of the respondents of the questionnaire said that they prayed with the

23. See *ibid.*

Bible daily, and 36% said that they prayed often with the Bible. The rest of the respondents rarely prayed with the Bible.

Those who opted to become priests were more committed to the reading and meditating on the Bible; 08% of these respondents said that they prayed with the Bible daily and 56% said that they often prayed with the Bible.

In the vocation meetings which are held in the Seminary on Saturday mornings and during the weekend retreats, it has become a must that the members do their meditation on the Bible. They are divided into groups of ten young people each and they read a passage from the Gospel under the guidance of a seminarian. They are encouraged to make that passage from Scripture the guiding motif of their behaviour in the following hours in which they live with their friends.

At the end of the day, in the presence of the Eucharist and in a quiet and prayerful atmosphere, the young people share with the other members of the group the experiences they lived as inspired by the Word of God.

The members are again encouraged to continue to do their meditation on the Word of God if possible on a daily basis. However very few succeed to do it and the reason for this is that when they are alone they lack a Christian community, however small it is, and whoever its members are (members of their family, friends or members of a religious association).

1.6.1.2 Participating in the Mass and prayers

There is a very important link between the Word of God and the participation in the Mass.²⁴ The Word of God leads those who listen to it and live it to meet at the Eucharistic table. Because of this, in the vocation meetings, the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations are told to participate in the Mass if possible daily.

The survey showed that 40% of the members of the Centre were keen to go to Mass daily and 56% went often to Mass.

24. Ibid, 3; "the call to holiness is rooted in Baptism and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the Eucharist."

But the respondents who later became priests were even more keen to go to Mass daily, 66% said that they went to Mass daily and 26% said that they often went to Mass.

Many of the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations consider it important for them to grow in their spiritual life by participating in the Mass. But it can also be said that many times the Mass is just another form of prayer for many young people and they can easily discard it when they are pressed for time as during their examinations period.

The members of the Vocations Centre were asked to say what preference they gave to the different forms of prayer. A large percentage or 27.5% said that they preferred evening prayer to any other kind of prayer and 21.5% gave their second preference to the Rosary. But only 14% said that they liked to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and only 09% said that they preferred to pray with others in prayer meetings.

However those who opted to become priests showed a more mature choice of prayer, 24% said that they preferred praying with others to any other way of praying. This is the fruit of the spiritual formation given to the members of the Centre where much emphasis is put on praying together.

1.6.2 Living the values of the Gospel

The spiritual life of the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations was tested where we presented to them three values which are very evident in the Gospel message, and asking them whether they lived their daily life according to these values.

1.6.2.1 Sharing, Helping and Forgiving

Sharing with others, helping others and forgiving others, are three values which outline the love which one has for others, especially if one builds one's life on the foundation of the Gospel. We may call them also the demands which Christ makes of those who accept to become His disciples. These values are important for anyone who wants to follow the vocation to the priesthood which is a ministry of service.

Many of the members or 67% of the Centre said that at some time in their life

they gave something of their own to someone who was in need of it. This percentage was higher or 84% among those who opted to become priests.

A smaller number of members of the Vocations Centre or 59.5% did voluntary work for a period of time by helping the sick, old people and people with some kind of disability. This percentage went up to 78% among those who opted to become priests; sometimes the members of the Centre are taken to orphanages and old people's homes to help and to visit the inmates.

The survey showed that the most appreciated value which is lived by the members of the Centre is forgiveness, 87% said that they forgave others. Also in this case a higher number or 96% of those who opted to become priests said that they forgave others.

These three values of generosity, helping others, and forgiveness are recurring themes in the vocation catechesis presented to the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations during the years of their formation. Besides offering well-prepared talks and personal counselling on these themes, the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations are encouraged to live these values by sharing goods among themselves, helping in orphanages and old people's homes and also sharing their joys and sorrows among themselves; and in the playground, games' rooms, and during walks they are helped to be able to live peacefully, share ideas, and get to know new friends.

1.6.2.2 Detachment

The Gospel value of detachment was presented in the questionnaire which was given to the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations as a test case to assess the members regarding their readiness to leave behind everything for the sake of Jesus in order to follow the vocation to the priesthood if this is their call.

Many of those who opted to become priests or 98% said that they did not worry at all about detaching themselves from money. But of all the respondents of the survey there were 77.5% who said that they did not worry about money were they to accept their vocation.

Of those who opted to become priests 82% said that they did not worry about detaching themselves from a career. While there were 59% of the respondents in general who said that they were ready to do the same.

Only 46% of those who opted to become priests said that they did not find it difficult to detach themselves from a family of their own, while 50% said that they would find it very difficult to detach themselves from a family of their own, and 04% said that it was too difficult for them not to have a family of their own. As it is expected few or 35.5% of all the respondents of the survey said that they did not find it difficult not to have a family of their own in order to live a celibate life.

1.6.2.3 Difficult situations

In order to assess the difficult situations which the members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations had to endure in their life as young people, the questionnaire asked them what confused them in their adolescence.

Personal relationships are the main cause of confusion in the life of the members of the Centre followed by indecision, sex, and doubts about faith.

Most of those who opted to become priests did not mention any particular situation that disturbed them in their adolescence: one mentioned misunderstanding on the part of parents, six mentioned difficulties with sex, four said that they found it hard to study, three mentioned doubts about their vocation, and two experienced the death of someone who was dear to them, a death which troubled them.

1.7 Summary

This panoramic view of the socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts wherein the ex-members of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations have grown up in the period between 1976 and 1993, has shown that this environment was strong enough in faith as to help a number of respondents of the survey to answer positively to the call to the priesthood. Maltese young people were helped in a special way to follow their call to the priesthood both by the Vocations Centre and also by the different components of the Christian community.

The Centre succeeded to attract a good number of young people who had received the sacrament of Confirmation by inviting them to its vocational activities. It has been through these activities that the Vocations Centre helped a good number of young people to accept the call to the priesthood and others who opted to become religious. At the same time, a large number of young people who had already begun to attend the vocational activities, "lost their vocation" or they were "expelled"

from the Centre. It is important that the Centre for Diocesan Vocations builds its structure and programme for the pastoral work for priestly vocations on the principles of the Gospel.

The components of the Christian community contributed to create the favourable environment for vocations to grow in number and in quality. The category of priests which tops the list of the components of the Christian community in helping vocations did so by their pastoral dedication; the parents helped vocations by having a good number of children and by welcoming the latter's vocation. And the schools, both government and private, whether of the Church or of other institutions, together with religious associations, provided an environment where students and members could live a good Christian life. But the bad impression which some priests left in the Christian communities, the lack of encouragement to attend vocation activities on the part of parents, and the factor of bad friends in schools as hindrance to the Christian life and priestly vocation, may have contributed to a decrease in the number of vocations to the priesthood.

An important factor that helped a continuous flow of vocations to the priesthood in Malta was that the members of the Vocations Centre and, in particular, those who opted to become priests, were encouraged to lead a Christian and spiritual life based on the reading of the Bible daily or often. They also participated in the Mass, many of them daily or often, and they built their lives on the Gospel values of sharing, generosity, forgiveness and detachment. It was not hard for them to face difficulties or, perhaps, they accepted them as a way of life as proposed by the Gospel.

What is necessary now and in the future is to continue to help young people to develop their lives on the principles of the Gospel in order that they may be first of all true Christians and, if this is the call of God for them, to become priests; and if God calls them for some other way of life, they live a true Christian life that creates a healthy Christian environment in the world and in the Christian community where they live. This is what the conclusion of these studies will explain at length and propose as a structure for a programme of a pre-seminary formation.

2 A PRIOR SEMINARY EVANGELISATION PROGRAMME OF FORMATION

What is needed today is an evangelisation of the socio-cultural and ecclesial

contexts wherein children, adolescents, young people, and adults live and grow in their Christian maturity. As St John wrote in the beginning of Christianity, "I have written to you, young men, because you are strong and God's word has made its home in you, and you have overcome the evil one."²⁵

Evangelisation is needed because "our century is marked by the manifestations of cultural transition which though rich in potential is very unstable and uncertain"²⁶ and it affects young people in general and prospective candidates to the priesthood in particular. Very often young people who ask to be admitted to the Seminary are good Christian people who come from families, schools and associations which create a good environment in many cases; but it must be said that many of them did not have a serious evangelisation neither in the family nor in the parish. In the Synod of Bishops about "The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today" (1990), Cardinal Moreira Neves said that "a big number of young people received not more than just colouring of faith and institutional religiosity."²⁷ The result of a lack of evangelisation is a weak faith.²⁸ This weakness in the faith of young Christians is revealed when they have "to make a personal sacrifice and enter for a permanent commitment be it in marriage, in the priesthood or simply in the leading of Christian life."²⁹

Several Synod Bishops suggested that it was very important to impart a "systematic catechesis to help young Christians to grow in their Christian faith."³⁰ The seeds of this new hope in the life of Christians are already present. John Paul II enumerated these seeds of hope when he said that in the life of Christians today there is "a powerful thirst for justice and peace, possibilities of evangelisation, the

25. See 1 Jn 2, 24.

26. See SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS 1990, *Instrumentum Laboris* (1990), 1. The working document of the Synod of Bishops of 1990 explained that this "cultural transition is deeply affected by materialism and its manifestations such as consumerism and pragmatism, by religious indifference and atheism and particularly by secularism and by the phenomenon of de-Christianisation."

27. See TETTAMANZI, 44.

28. Ibid, 65; Cardinal Edward Bede Clancy said that "a weak faith makes an inadequate provision for the cross."

29. See *ibid*.

30. Ibid, 66; Bishop Leonard Lagaspi also said that "young people must grow in a communitarian environment and begin from an early age to opt to help the poor people."

thirst for God and for an active meaningful relationship with him,"³¹ as well as "forms of voluntary service and participation in spirituality groups whether traditional but renewed ones or of more recent origin."³²

2.1 Prior Seminary formation

The need of the introduction of a prior Seminary formation was already announced in the *Relatio ante disceptationem* of this Synod of Bishops by the relator Cardinal Moreira Neves who said that "a post conciliar novelty, *res omnino nova*, should be mentioned: the propaedeutic seminaries that prepare the candidates for entrance into the Major Seminaries."³³

The first references to this novelty in the formation of candidates to the priesthood are found in the Second Vatican Council Decree on the Formation of priests, *Optatam totius*. The Council said that "special attention must be given to adolescents and young people who are receiving their formation in the Minor Seminaries or in alternative institutes as well as in institutes which are established to give the necessary formation to those who receive the call of God in adult life."³⁴ What is meant by the formation which is necessary prior to entrance to the major Seminaries is specified by the Council decree when it says that the Bishops must establish a period of time in which the seminarians receive "a more intense spiritual training."³⁵ But at the very beginning of their formation in the Major Seminaries, the Council decreed that the students of the Major seminaries should be introduced to the Mystery of Christ which influences the whole history of man, is part and parcel of the life of the Church and it appears most evident in the priestly ministry.³⁶

2.2 The contents of the prior Seminary formation

2.2.1 Human formation

The pre-seminary formation was referred to consistently by the Synod Fathers in the Synod of 1990. Going through the speeches of the Bishops certain

31. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 6.

32. See *ibid*, 9.

33. See TETTAMANZI, 233.

34. See *Optatam totius*, 3.

35. See *ibid*, 12.

36. See *ibid*, 14

characteristics of the pre-seminary formation were underlined. Among these characteristics, the candidates to the priesthood must have a good psychological and physical state of health, a religious experience of God, and an adequate affective equilibrium.³⁷ Some Bishops spoke about the human maturity that is necessary for those who want to be candidates to the priesthood because “many crises of priests are based on psychological and emotional immaturity.”³⁸ In particular human maturity is necessary for anyone who wants to embrace the state of celibacy. Canadian Bishop Frederick Bernard Henry said that the charism of celibacy calls for a high degree of psychological-sexual development and it needs to be presented in positive terms.³⁹

Prior to seminary entrance candidates should be carefully assessed not only in terms of their call to pastoral ministry but also for their overall human maturity and in particular for their ability to live a chaste-celibate life.⁴⁰ And therefore there should be means by which the human maturity of the candidates can be assessed. Bishop Robin Walsh Leamy coming from the Pacific said that “candidates for the seminary need to have good selection procedures and screening methods.”⁴¹ Reverend Timothy L. Castello from the United States who was invited as an expert at this Synod of Bishops, affirmed that “the Seminary has its own programme and it cannot be the place where to resolve conflicts of development related to adolescence and adult life; it is presupposed that the candidate has a good basis of personal maturity.”⁴²

2.2.2 Spiritual formation

When speaking about the prior Seminary formation, certain Bishops spoke about the construction of the interior man. Bishop Bala of Cameroon identified the one propaedeutic year with the spiritual year.⁴³ Cardinal Michele Giordano spoke of the pre-seminary formation as a time of spiritual beginning, clarification of vocation motivations, construction of the “interior man” so as to acquire the certainty of

37. See TETTAMANZI, 272.

38. See *ibid*, 157.

39. See *ibid*.

40. See *ibid*, 76.

41. See *ibid*, 159.

42. See *ibid*, 98.

43. See *ibid*, 159

faith to be called by Christ to the ministry of the Church.⁴⁴ The emphasis on the spiritual life of the candidates to the priesthood is enhanced by the fact that today many seminarians come from the public schools and de-Christianized environments. His Beatitude Stephanos II Ghattas of Egypt said that “because the majority of those who are admitted to the inter-rital and inter-diocesan Major Seminary in Cairo do not come from the minor seminary but from the public schools, we have had to institute one or two years of propaedeutics during which new comers receive an intense religious and spiritual formation; the basis of Christian doctrine, the identity of the priest, the demands of the priestly life, the habits of a life of piety and a regular community life.”⁴⁵

Listening to the Word of God, initiation into personal prayer and the Liturgy, to the life of the community and to the sense of responsibility were some of the themes suggested by the Bishops of the Synod for the pre-seminary formation. Bishop Joseph Satoshi Fuhahori of Japan said that “from the beginning of his formation the candidate for the priesthood must learn to read the Bible as the Word of God and to listen in faith the call that the Lord makes to him and he needs to learn the life of a disciple.”⁴⁶

2.2.3 *The right attitude towards the vocation to the priesthood*

Bishop Margeot said that “experience shows that the discernment of motivations for the vocation to the priesthood made at the very beginning is very useful.”⁴⁷ Prior Seminary formation helps the clarification of the vocation to the priesthood and this can come about by a good spiritual direction. Archbishop Pio Laghi, the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education said that “only a correct spiritual direction guarantees the Church a healthy and stable discernment and makes the answer to the divine call be based on faith. It is only then that it will be in a position to perceive the sense of the vocation and its requirements.”⁴⁸

Special note should be made of the intervention given by Cardinal Danneels of Belgium who asked: “Where are the obstacles? No serious search has been carried out on this point; one hypothesis is that there is no question of a lack of generosity among

44. See *ibid*, 109.

45. See *ibid*, 177.

46. See *ibid*, 126.

47. See *ibid*, 134.

48. See *ibid*, 245.

young people, they commit themselves for great horizontal humane ideals. But for God? It is the vertical level of theological faith in young people and in communities which is too low.”⁴⁹ Commenting on the intervention of Cardinal Danneels, Donato Negro says that this point goes to the roots both of the deficiencies in the human and Christian formation and also of the socio-cultural phenomena in general.⁵⁰

2.3 Evangelising the Christian environments

Together with the Bishops of the Synod about *The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today*, John Paul II asked for “a sufficient period of preparation prior to Seminary Formation.”⁵¹ The reason for the establishment of this pre-Seminary formation was given by John Paul II himself when he said that “while in the past most candidates came from the Minor Seminaries and the Christian life of the community offered a suitable Christian instruction and education, this situation in many places has changed.”⁵² In the society of today, even though boys, adolescents and young people are brought up as Christians, yet “certain deficiencies are found too often in young people and they regard not only the Christian and spiritual formation, but also the human and cultural formation.”⁵³

Hence it is more than necessary that the pastoral work for Vocations that is carried out today is “aimed decisively and primarily towards restoring a Christian mentality: one built on faith and sustained by it.”⁵⁴ This is the aim of the Evangelisation that Christ introduced in the world when he said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.”⁵⁵ This is the entire mission of the Church and at the same time it is “her most profound identity”⁵⁶ because it is through Evangelisation that the Church is built up into a community of faith or “a community that confesses the faith in full adherence to the Word of God which is celebrated in the Sacraments, and lived in charity.”⁵⁷

49. See *ibid*, 136

50. See DONATO NEGRO, *Anno Propedeutico: vera novita' del Concilio Vaticano II*, in *Seminarium* 32 (1992), 605.

51. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 62.

52. See *ibid*.

53. See G. CAPRILE, *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi Ottava Assemblea Generale Ordinaria*, Roma 1991, 541.

54. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 37.

55. See Mk 16, 15.

56. See PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14.

57. See JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 33.

Only through a mature Christian community can a true Evangelisation and Catechesis be made in countries which are dominated by an economic well-being and consumerism which co-exists with poverty and misery and where life is lived as if God does not exist. But such a mature Christian community can also give life to Christians who are dominated by traditional piety and devotion which can easily be the prey of secularism and of different sects.

Mature Christian communities can also beget new vocations to the priesthood because in itself the Christian community is a community that is called by God to live up to the ideals of the Gospel. When the Church as a whole can respond to the call of God, each individual that inhabits the Christian community can also respond to the will of God to live up to his holiness. But the begetting of vocations to the priesthood by the Christian community is also a challenge to the whole Christian community "to care for the birth, discernment and fostering of vocations, particularly those to the priesthood."⁵⁸

2.3.1 The family

Christifideles Laici says "that what is first needed for the evangelisation of the world is the formation of those who will evangelise."⁵⁹ The Christian family plays the most important part in the evangelisation of the world and it bears the responsibility to foster the birth and growth of vocations both priestly and religious as well as in the lay state.

In the Synod of Bishops, Bishop Norbert Wendelin Mtega of Tanzania said that "if we want to solve some of the serious problems of vocations, formation to the priesthood and even of celibacy let us begin to teach catechesis in our families and make them true Christian families."⁶⁰ It is only from such Christian families can important human and natural virtues begin to take root in the life of the children, adolescents and young people. What is meant by Christian families is "united, healthy families marked by a deep faith and prayerfulness"⁶¹ which become as it

58. See JOHN PAUL II, Discourse at the end of Synod (27 October 1990), in TETTAMANZI, 318.

59. See JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles laici*, 35.

60. See TETTAMANZI, 209.

61. See *ibid*, 52.



were “a first seminary” in which children can acquire from the beginning an awareness of piety and prayer and of love for the Church.”⁶²

2.3.2 *The school and associations*

The school works hand in hand with the family as “an educating community.”⁶³ It is the school that can infuse “in the hearts of boys and young people a desire to do God’s will in that state of life which is most suitable to each person, and never excluding the vocation to the priestly ministry.”⁶⁴ *Pastores dabo vobis* mentions the lay faithful who would include the catechists, teachers, educators and youth ministers and it says that “the more they inculcate a deep appreciation of young people’s vocation and mission in the Church, the more young people will be able to recognize the unique value of the priestly vocation and mission.”⁶⁵

Pastores dabo vobis mentions “the groups which promote vocations whose members make an important contribution by prayer and sufferings offered up for priestly and religious vocations, as well as by moral and material support.”⁶⁶ It also mentions “the groups, movements and associations of lay faithful which are proving a particularly fertile field for the manifestation of vocations to consecrated life, and are truly the environments in which vocations can be encouraged and can grow.”⁶⁷

2.3.3 *The parish and communities*

The parish is a “fertile ground where vocations are born and mature.”⁶⁸ However, the parish is alive and can provide the necessary Christian environment when it is truly the gathering of the family of God or a community that is animated by the commandment of love for God and for one another. A parish becomes a Christian community when it is renewed by the principles of the Gospel, namely: first of all by the Word of God that should not only be listened to and celebrated, but above all

62. See SYNOD OF BISHOPS (1990) on *The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of today*, Propositio 14.

63. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 41.

64. See SYNOD OF BISHOPS 1990, Propositio 15.

65. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 41.

66. See *ibid.*

67. See *ibid.*

68. See TETTAMANZI, 95.

lived and then shared by the members of the community; secondly by fraternal union that leads to a new and practical commitment to love one another; thirdly by the celebration of the Eucharist which leads to the rediscovery of the profound meaning of the sacraments unifying liturgy and life in the paschal mystery; and finally by prayer or union with God which gives rise to a completely new relationship with God not only on the personal level but also on the communitarian level.

In the parishes thus renewed, like the first communities, the new Christian communities experience the presence of the Risen Lord which was promised to those who are united in his name. Such parishes become schools of Christian life in which the Christians live for one another and in which each Christian is able to find his place and role and his own vocation. In these parishes “an exceptionally fruitful apostolate and authentic conversions”⁶⁹ take place as well as new vocations come forward because young people hear or hear again the call of God and become priests and deacons, while others become religious and still others become committed lay people.⁷⁰

A new source of vocations to the priesthood are the new spiritual movements born before and after the Council period by promoting Evangelisation in the ecclesial communities. The *Lineamenta* of the Synod of Bishops about *The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today* mention three main characteristics of these ecclesial communities:

1. They are a sign of our times and they have a strong impact on youth;
2. They stimulate conversion and they awaken a sense of God and initiate persons into a life of prayer and give them an apostolic spirit;
3. They give birth to a number of religious and priestly vocations.⁷¹

Bishop Klaus Hemmerle affirmed that today there are two main sources of vocations:

69. See *ibid.*

70. See *ibid.*

71. See SYNOD OF BISHOPS 1990, *Lineamenta*, 18.

1. there is an increase in the number of those who have already learnt a profession and later on they discover their vocation to the priesthood;
2. there is certainly not a lack of vocations coming from the new spiritual movements.

Sandro Panizzolo says that “vocations are forthcoming from the ecclesial movements because the members of these movements live their Christian life in an intense way.”⁷² According to Panizzolo, these ecclesial associations have three things in common:

1. a strong spiritual experience and brotherly life;
2. a serious commitment to service and mission;
3. a lifestyle that is fresh, enthusiastic and direct.⁷³

And Bishop Derek Worlock found that the reason for the increase of vocations coming from the new ecclesial movements is “that vocations often come from settings in which young people experience a community of faith.”⁷⁴ John Paul II gave his approval to such ecclesial communities when he described them as a “fertile field for the manifestations of vocations to consecrated life and true environments in which vocations can be encouraged and can grow.”⁷⁵

2.4 The means for Evangelisation

2.4.1 Prayer

The first means for evangelising the Christian communities and help them give birth to new vocations for the priesthood is prayer. Praying for vocations is an act of obedience to Jesus’ persuasive and demanding invitation to “pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest (Mt 9, 38).”⁷⁶ In the 1990 Synod

72. See SANDRO PANNIZZOLO, “Seminari e movimenti, gruppi e associazioni, cammini ecclesiali”, in *Seminarium*, (1990) 278.

73. See *ibid.*

74. See TETTAMANZI, 263.

75. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 41.

76. See *ibid* 38.

of Bishops it was affirmed that prayer for vocations is necessary both when vocations are lacking and this is an act of faith in God whereby it is acknowledged by the Church that vocations to the priesthood are a gift from God; and also “when vocations are thriving because in prayer the Church finds the support necessary to have a happy result for the greatest number of vocations.”⁷⁷

The communitarian aspect of vocations must be very much emphasised because “it is the Church, in her dignity and responsibility as a priestly people, that possesses in prayer and in the celebration of the Liturgy the essential and primary stages of her pastoral work for vocations...and this is required not only of individuals but of entire ecclesial communities.”⁷⁸ The communitarian aspect of the prayer for vocations is expressed in the Liturgy and especially in the Eucharist because the Liturgy and the Eucharist make Christians participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ and therefore they join the Christians to Christ who “freely and willingly made his way in obedience to the Father’s call (see Jn 13,1).”⁷⁹

The Liturgy and the Eucharist also show the Church as a priestly people and a community structured in the variety and complementarity of its charisms and vocations. Being members of the Christian community and participating in the priesthood of the faithful, all the members of the Church must be educated to pray for vocations in order that the Church may have the priests who are necessary to lead her in the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

“It is necessary to educate boys and young people so that they will become faithful to prayer and meditation on the Word of God so that in silence and listening, they will be able to perceive the Lord who is calling them to the priesthood and be able to follow that call promptly and generously.”⁸⁰ John Paul II says that “prayer for vocations should become an ever more continual and widespread habit within the entire Christian community.”⁸¹

77. See TETTAMANZI, 140.

78. See SYNOD OF BISHOPS 1990, *Propositio* 15.

79. See *ibid.*

80. See *ibid.*

81. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 38.

2.4.2 Proclaiming Vocations

Proclaiming vocations and calling its members to follow the call to the priesthood is a commitment which the Church bears towards its members. The Church must show her members that as she herself received from the Father through Christ the call to love the Father and that she responded to the call by loving the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit; in the same way she proclaims to them the call of the Father to love Him and if he also calls them to love Him by becoming ministers of Christ, she helps them to respond in a positive way.

As *Pastores dabo vobis* says, “the Church feels herself irrevocably committed to the task of proclaiming and witnessing to the Christian meaning of vocation, or as we may say, to the Gospel of vocation...it is also important to make a direct preaching on the mystery of vocation in the Church, on the value of the ministerial priesthood and on the urgent need which the people of God has of the ministerial priesthood.”⁸² The catechesis of vocation or the imparting of the teaching on vocation to children, adolescents, young people and adults must include some main aspects like clearing doubts and correcting mistaken ideas about the vocation to the priesthood; but it must also help “to open the hearts of believers to accept the gift of the vocation to the priesthood to create the favourable conditions for the birth of new vocations.”⁸³

John Paul II said that “the time has come to speak courageously and there should be no fear that one is thereby conditioning them or limiting their freedom when one presents the vocation to the priesthood as a priceless gift and a splendid and privileged form of Christian living when there is a real possibility for young people who demonstrate the necessary gifts and talents and when this invitation is made at the right time.”⁸⁴ The direct call to the priesthood which is made to young people is not necessarily made by words, but it must be made first and foremost by “the joyful witness of priests which can raise questions and lead to decisions, even definitive ones.”⁸⁵ The witness of priests which can speak very loudly to the young

82. See *ibid.*, 39.

83. See *ibid.*

84. See *ibid.*

85. See *ibid.*, 40.

people of today was emphasised by Bishop Joseph Mercieca when he said that “the life of priests in the parishes, with their presence and their way of life, greatly influence the young people and the candidates to the priesthood when the latter hear priests say that they are happy in their priesthood.”⁸⁶

The direct calling to the priesthood that is addressed to the young people leads to the formation which young people need in order to be prepared to be ready to receive the call and to be able to answer it in a responsible and mature way. “The Church fulfils her mission when she guides every member of the faithful to discover and live his or her own vocation in freedom and to bring it to fulfilment in charity.”⁸⁷

2.4.3 The Christian formation of young people

It is very interesting and important to see that the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* sees “children, adolescents and young people” as the addressees of her educational role and in particular when it sees them as the persons in whom it wants to instill “the will to follow Jesus Christ in a total and attractive way...so that God with his call reaches the heart of each individual, and the Spirit, who abides deep within each disciple (see 1 Jn 3,24) gives himself to each Christian with different charisms and special signs.”⁸⁸ The formation that must be imparted to children, adolescents and young people must first and foremost aim to form a true Christian life in them and only when they become true Christians can they perceive the true meaning of the call to the ministerial priesthood. This is because as Bishop Klaus Hemmerle said “the stages of formation of the priest are the following: 1. to live as a baptized person; 2. to live as a disciple of Christ; 3. to be fully available to the people in need, and 4. to be capable of carrying out the priestly ministry.”⁸⁹

When young people live the common priesthood as all Christians should do, they will have the most solid foundation of the vocation to the ministerial priesthood because as Cardinal Aloysius Lorscheider said “the more the common priesthood is exercised and developed the more will priestly vocations increase.”⁹⁰

86. See TETTAMANZI, 187.

87. See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 40.

88. See *ibid*.

89. See TETTAMANZI, 97

90. See *ibid*, 64.

Two principal means that are needed to give the best formation to young people to listen to the call to the priesthood are spiritual direction and the service of love. Children, adolescents and young people are to discover this important means whereby they can discern the call of God through the medium of those people who represent God especially priests. On the other hand it is the responsibility of priests "to devote time and energy to this work of education and the personal spiritual guidance of young people."⁹¹ Children, adolescents and young people should make an experience of the service of love which makes them participate in the "charity of Christ"⁹² and which finds its expression in the priestly vocation. The service of love gives to young people the spirit of sacrifice, a love for others and especially unconditional self giving.

2.5 A specific programme of Christian formation: the spirituality of unity

In his speech to the Synod of Bishops 1990, the author made it very clear what he wanted to present to young people when they attend meetings for vocations to the priesthood was to help them understand that instruction alone is not enough. What is important for them is to live the Gospel and to experience it personally. Only in this way may their vocation be built on rock, according to the words of Jesus: "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock."⁹³

2.5.1 Young people live the Gospel

In vocation work, one is very often struck by how different young people listen to an abstract vocation catechesis and how they listen when they are told to view life in the right of the Gospel. The aim of vocational groups is that their members commit themselves to live the Word together. Periodically, it is proposed to everyone – from ten to twenty years of age – to go more deeply into one phrase of Scripture by putting it into practice in the situation of their daily lives. Then they are invited to share their experiences of living the word. Moreover, during the days and weekends in which the members of the vocational groups live together, they are introduced to the main themes of the Gospel: the discovery of God as love, the commitment to do His Will, love of neighbour, love of one another with Jesus in the midst, the

91. See *ibid.*

92. See *ibid.*

93. See Mt 7, 24.

Eucharist, suffering and coming to life with Christ. Every theme proposed is oriented towards putting it into practice.

2.5.2 *Young people are happy with vocations*

Young men like this line of action very much. It can be noted how this commitment to live the Gospel together brings about in them a true transformation. And the one who brings this about is Jesus Himself, the Only Teacher. In this way, young men relive the experience of the early disciples: listening to Jesus and putting into practice His words, they pass from a simply human mentality to an evangelical mentality. This change can be seen in certain points around which the charism of unity is expressed today.

2.5.3 *Freedom*

Perhaps the ideal that has most taken hold on the young generations today is that of autonomy and personal freedom. Young people search for “being”, but too often they stop short at “having.” The effects of consumer society are well known and they threaten to suffocate in people every sense of the transcendent. Living the Word frees young people from these easy mirages and makes them discover their true purpose in life. Jesus proposes to young people to put God in the first place, putting aside all the rest. And they do it. It is surprising to see that in so doing young men do not find it difficult to put aside the amusements of their friends.

2.5.4 *Love*

The fact is that they find an ideal that is more beautiful than anything the world can offer them. In living the Word, they discover that they are no longer alone but that they have found a Father who loves them and looks after them. “Why, every hair on your head”, said Jesus, “has been counted.”⁹⁴ Young men find in this promise the foundation of their life, their true identity. Therefore, they believe in the unlimited love of God for them and they want to respond to this love. Again, it is the Word which shows them the way: “It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the person

94. See Mt 10, 30.

who does the will of My Father in heaven.”⁹⁵ This makes them discover a religion which is not made primarily of sentiments, but which is expressed in the commitment to listen, moment after moment, to the voice of God as it is manifested to them in the commandments, in the precepts of the Church, in their conscience, in their duties. Confident that it is a Father who speaks to them, they abandon themselves solely to His plans. They know, in fact, that anything they could possibly plan for themselves would always be something limited. Thus their existence is transformed into a divine adventure.

2.5.5 Christian charity

Furthermore, there is one sentence in particular which impresses young men. Jesus said, “I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”⁹⁶ And so they begin to see soon the traits of Christian charity begin to stand out in them: they begin to love everyone without discriminating between the pleasant and the unpleasant, between the young and the old: they find the strength to take the initiative in loving the people they meet; they are ready to serve, to identify with the joys and the needs of others. In doing so, they lay solid foundations not only for the married life but also for a celibate life.

By loving in this way, they are often loved in return, and so they experience the countless fruits of mutual love. This is what happens especially in the many moments when they seek to live together and the *law* of these moments is Jesus’ new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.”⁹⁷ This is the essence of every moment of living together: from prayer to preparing meals, from manual labour to games. Everything is an occasion of experiencing the new style of life that Jesus brought on earth. And it is even possible to achieve a true communion of goods.

95. See Mt 7, 21.

96. See Mt 25, 40.

97. See Jn 15, 12.

98. See Mt 18, 20.

2.5.6 Jesus among us

This builds among young men a true family atmosphere. And not only this. "Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them."⁹⁸ In living the new commandment, the young men find the key to experiencing among them, in an altogether special way, the living presence of Jesus. In a certain sense, it is as if He had come out of the tabernacles in order to live everywhere: in houses, in schools, on the street. And it is because of this presence that the young men become radiant sources of Christian life in the midst of their friends. As a result, in the archdiocese of Malta, there has been a growth from 500 to 1,000 young men who meet at the parish level and in vocational groups.

2.6 Living the Word of God

2.6.1 Rediscovery of suffering

Putting into practice the Word sheds new light on the mystery of suffering. While the world around the young men teaches them to avoid suffering, to fear it, Jesus makes them discover that every experience of suffering, every misunderstanding, doubt, failure, can become an encounter with Him crucified, an opportunity to show Him their love. They suddenly experience that if suffering is loved, it can be transformed into an experience of resurrection, into new love. It is above all in this personal and profound experience of the mystery of Jesus on the cross that those whom God calls to the priesthood find the stimulus to abandon other fascinating prospects, like wealth, a career and a family.

2.6.2 Rediscovery of the Church

There are still other effects of living the Word together: the dynamic discovery of Jesus causes in young men a discovery also of the Church, a convinced acceptance of the doctrine of the Church, an intense love for the Eucharist, in which they see the source and the apex of their unity with God and with one another. The figure of Mary also comes into limelight as the perfect disciple, the model for every Christian. Like her, as these young men are gradually penetrated by the Word of God, they become sensitive to the voice of the Spirit who speaks in their hearts.

2.6.3 Rediscovery of the Priestly Vocation

On this foundation, the call to the priesthood no longer finds obstacles. When

young men are committed to living a life based on the Gospel, then also their particular calling comes into evidence more easily. "I will manifest myself...to the one who loves me."⁹⁹ And it is surprising to see how spontaneously they often say their, "Here I am, Lord."¹⁰⁰ Vocations that come to life on this foundation are not motivated, which easily happens otherwise, by outside factors like perhaps the unconscious searching for social or ecclesial position. They are authentic vocations. It is a great joy to see many young men reach the maturity of making themselves completely available to God and to the Church. So it is not so difficult to propose the priesthood to those who show objective signs of being called. This experience which has been going on since 1972 in the diocese of Malta has given some 140 students to the Major Seminary 60 of whom are already giving their pastoral services to the Christian communities of the diocese; others have followed the path to the Consecrated life and many others have committed themselves to live in the Church as laymen.

'Cor Jesu'
Triq il-Pitkali
Attard

⁹⁹ See Jn 14,21.

¹⁰⁰ See Is 6, 8.